

**DIFFERENTIATION IN EDUCATION – OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS IN A
WIDENING PARTICIPATION HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION**

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Abstract

Differentiation is discussed as a teaching and learning strategy used to enable and encourage better educational outcomes in the Higher Education context. As we examine differentiation within our practice in Early Childhood Studies and Business Studies, we take into consideration factors such as stage of learning, institutional structure and student characteristics. The aims of this paper are to explore the individual differentiation practices within the two disciplinary areas through personal reflection; to explore the opportunities and limitations to differentiated practices in the HE context, specifically from the point of view of students; and to compare the views from two different academic disciplines in order to highlight similarities, differences and good practice. This is achieved in semi-structured interviews with students in their final year who reflect on their learning journeys in a widening participation university.

Key words: *differentiation, teaching and learning, students as individuals, widening participation*

1. INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is on differentiation as an approach to teaching and learning leading to improved educational outcomes for students studying at Higher Education (HE) institutions. Differentiation is commonly described as a process whereby lecturers help all students to progress through the curriculum by selecting and varying teaching strategies in order to respond to individual needs. Such an approach ensures that all students learn effectively despite their many differences. Differentiation is a contemporary trend in the field of education both in schools and HE institutions that favour flexibility in learning and focusing on students' individualities.

Differentiation is particularly relevant in the current UK widening participation agenda. A large number of modern post-1992 universities are particularly focused on the quality of teaching and the student experience which calls for more focus on students' individual strengths and weaknesses in developing and achieving their learning potential. In this paper we examine the use of differentiation in the context of a small university in the North West of England characterised by social and economic disadvantage. By thinking through our own practices in two different academic disciplines (Early Childhood Studies and Business Studies) we reflect on the opportunities and limitations of differentiation practices. As part of our reflective journey, we sought the help of our students to find out what works in our classrooms on a more practical level and how students from differing disciplines perceive the importance and place of differentiation in a widening participation HE institution. Both groups of students had just completed a Foundation degree and have been in our classes for a number of modules. Their extensive experience was a useful starting point for bringing student voice in our own reflections.

In terms of limitations, we acknowledge that differentiation can be resource intensive and require a unique range of skill-set and capabilities on the part of lecturers. For students, it can be difficult and challenging to manage their learning and expectations given their prior potentially negative experiences of schooling and the challenges of everyday life outside of university. However, as a more independent approach to learning in HE, differentiation offers a useful aspirational and developmental tool – one that given the right conditions allows students to aspire and stretch their learning in order to increase the pace. Incorporating previous experience and expertise on the part of the students, which is an integral part of effective learning, and making teaching directly relevant to students' specific circumstances results in effective differentiation and increased motivation. Such a 'developmental'

and ‘constructive approach’ puts emphasis not only on intellectual strength and ability, but also on the emotional development and growth of the learner.

The paper begins with an illustration of the HE context explaining the types of providers of HE with a particular focus on the differences between these. It is suggested that modern post-92 universities are driving forward the widening participation agenda by providing access to HE for students who would traditionally not have attended university due to their backgrounds. The hierarchy between HE institutions is explained through examples of the perceived social and academic benefits for students pursuing HE. We then move to the idea of differentiation in teaching and learning in HE that enables students to succeed in a widening participation context. After defining differentiation and its many forms, we reflect on our own classroom practices and how differentiation is manifested in these. We bring these ideas forward to two groups of students from different disciplines in order to obtain their perspective of differentiation in HE. The paper concludes with series of recommendations for improving practice and continuous professional development of lecturers from widening participation HE institutions. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that some of these conclusions may be applicable across other institutional and cultural contexts.

2. DIFFERENTIATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN THE UK

An apparent need to address inequality and the systematic underrepresentation and achievement of perceived disadvantaged groups has led to debates about differentiated pathways that provide access to HE for wider populations (Shay 2013). From a policy perspective, this has led to the expansion of HE institutions aiming to diversify traditional academic HE provision (Croxford & Raffe 2013, QAA 2010) and fulfilling the demand for employees with HE qualifications. This is set against a backdrop of increasing variation in students’ lives and thus study situations (Reimer & Jacob 2011). In the UK HE institutions were unified when the distinction between universities and polytechnics was abolished in 1992 so that all HE providers have a similar formal status. However, in practice informal differences in function and standing are widely recognised between the newer and older institutions. Despite the well intentioned objectives of expansion, institutional ‘differentiation in HE is based on a hierarchy that is strong, pervasive and persistent; it is deeply embedded in social structures and, in particular, in wider processes of social selection and social reproduction’ (Croxford & Raffe 2015, p. 1637). It could be suggested that HE provision operates within a two-tier system predefined by students’ socio-economic background.

The simultaneous increase in overall interest and participation in HE and institutional differentiation reflect the socially selective access to the different HE institutions. According to Croxford & Raffe (2013) there are two possible ways to interpret this occurrence. Firstly, institutional differentiation increases the options of programmes and levels of study for students, one where students from less privileged socio-economic and academic backgrounds simply end up in newer/ lower-tier institutions as older/higher-tier institutions continue to be socially selective and show a distinct preference for privileged students from the ‘right’ socio-economic and educational background. Secondly, the expansion of HE provision contributes to inclusion, enhancing chances for less privileged students to participate in all institutions irrespective of reputation and status because of the increasing diversity of degree options (QAA 2010). The distinction in this interpretation is important for a number of reasons (Croxford & Raffe 2015). At the core of it is the ongoing debate about the purposes of HE (see Collini 2012) and whether this is best achieved through a division of function among institutions. The goal of such division may be undermined if it is hierarchical, and especially if the hierarchy is informal where in some cases particular functions and the institutions that perform them have higher status than others (e.g. research and teaching). In addition, widening participation aspirations and policies may have unintended consequences if HE institutions are differentiated in a hierarchical order linked to social status and positional advantage. This reinforces academic hierarchies and strengthens the position of institutions with existing reputational advantage. It could be suggested that institutional differentiation is central to social reproduction within HE and thus may obstruct efforts to effectively widen participation at scale. While widened participation in HE have increased enrolment in particular institutions that give priority to attracting students from underrepresented groups, and design their

programmes and structures accordingly, it also results in these groups continuing to be underrepresented in institutions with higher status and positional value.

Some attention has been paid to examining the influences of such structural changes at the level of the individual, particularly in relation to behaviour concerning choices of HE. For instance, Shavit et al. (2007, in Croxford & Raffe 2013) examine inequality in eligibility and entry into HE suggesting that institutional differentiation within HE not only affects initial choice and socially unequal patterns of access to courses and institutions, but also has implication for employment outcomes. They suggest that despite the expansion of HE provision, inequalities between social class in HE enrolment continue to persist both in terms of overall numbers and the characteristics of less privileged students accepted into more established universities and programmes (Croxford & Raffe 2013). It could reflect one of two possibilities, the matching of institutions and students based on cultural dispositions and preferences, or the result of practical considerations linked with the costs of travel, access to extended family support and the reduced risk of discrimination in institutions as 'cultural preferences are used to legitimate more instrumental and rational choices' (Croxford & Raffe 2015, p. 1638). Institutional differentiation in HE is a phenomenon that can but does not necessarily lead to a change in the relationship between socio-economic background and participation. While it actually leads to the seeming inclusion of less privileged students, higher-tier institutions remain socially selective and do not contribute in any significant way to abating social inequalities in access.

In terms of labour market participation, less privileged student are far more likely to commit significant amount of their time to paid employment during their studies, which has negative consequences for their engagement and degree achievement. Inequality in degree completion between students who enter newer versus old institutions is part of a notable variation in the relationships between employment, family background, and degree achievement across these different types of HE institutions (Croxford & Raffe 2013). These finding do not necessarily imply that institutional differentiation always leads to different life opportunities for students from varied social backgrounds. In other words, many current developments may simply strengthen the existing institutional hierarchy rather than introduce a truly widening participation system in UK HE (Croxford & Raffe 2013).

3. DIFFERENTIATION AND REFLECTION ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Widening participation HE providers tend to attract students primarily from their local communities who have had varying prior experiences of education. Due to this dynamic, the role of the lecturer in a widening participation HE has somewhat evolved from the traditional lecturing role in the higher-tier institutions. Teaching a socially diverse student population requires honing of teaching skills and effective approaches to include students from very different backgrounds. In the role of lecturers in HE, reflection is an essential practice, but even more so in institutions aiming to widen access to education. Reflection is described as a particular way to think about a situation as it is experienced, leading to focused examination, insights and problem solving. In this respect, reflection is a process of 'learning from practice' (Dewey 1933; Schon 1983).

A reflective approach to continuous learning and problem solving is principally relevant in the complex and often idiosyncratic HE context (Biggs 1989) where lecturers operate. The peculiarities of such contexts are evident in the diversity of students in UK HE institutions. Students (and lecturers) are part of a group exemplifying remarkable difference and diversity. Diversity plays out in the form of abilities, motivation, interests, prior experiences, personal agendas for joining a HE institution and so forth, which are also interlinked with expectations of 'what', 'why' and 'how' in learning (Scudamore 2013). Catering for this diversity is a move away from the narrower practice of mixed ability teaching into a more distinct notion of differentiation.

Differentiation could be defined as a process whereby teachers help all students to progress through the curriculum by selecting teaching methods that match the individual needs of learners (Petty 2009). This approach to teaching and learning ensures that all students learn effectively despite their many differences (Landrum & McDuffie 2010). It is a contemporary trend in the field of education both in

school and HE institutions that favour flexibility in learning and focusing on students' individualities. Differentiation does not advocate a one-to-one approach to teaching and learning; this is of course not pragmatic especially in the resource-constrained setting of today's HE. Rather, the conceptualisation and application of differentiation here draws from the two key commonalities in the student group: (1) they have all been successful learners and (2) they all seek to attain particular qualifications as means of achieving success.

Differentiation is relevant to all disciplinary areas and while concerned with the content and curriculum to an extent, it also 'tells us how to teach' (Tomlinson 2000, p.9). In a way, differentiation makes best use of the curriculum by adopting various teaching and learning approaches to respond to the individual needs and preferences of students from diverse learning backgrounds. Such an approach to teaching and learning usefully recognises both knowledge related and socially related aspects. In the case of widening participation HE institutions, socially related aspects of teaching and learning are of particular importance. Neumann et al. (2002) examine the following social aspects: characteristics of teachers; types of teaching approaches; and the learning requirements of students. These aspects are defined to an extent by the social expectations among the relevant academic community and as such set the context of HE socialisation for students.

Neumann et al. (2002) distinguish between hard and soft, pure and applied knowledge in disciplines. According to their framework, both areas of focus to this paper Early Childhood Studies and Business Studies fit into the soft applied disciplines category. As such, they aim to develop and enhance students' professional practice through multiple influences and interactions, self-reflection and development of people skills. In that respect, there are similarities between the two disciplines in terms of aspects of teaching and learning and related practices. These include the need to enable students to develop lateral thinking skills, critical perspectives, problem-solving abilities, fluent oral and written expression, self-reflection, combined with practically developed knowledge and the ability to relate theory to practice (Neumann et al. 2002). Teaching and learning of this character requires substantial time with the lecturer, teaching preparation and fine-tuning into the individual needs of students in order to provide scaffolding.

Petty (2009) proposes three different but inter-related ways of implementing a differentiated strategy: differentiated tasks, differentiated learning preferences/support needs, and differentiated feedback/targets. These provide evidence for orientation towards individualised deep learning and growing approaches to differentiation where both students and lecturer are actively involved in continuous assessment, reassessment of events and constructive feedback (Scudamore 2013). It supports a deep approach to learning because it helps students to make the transition to learning independently while they are still supported behind the scenes with relevant feedback. Working towards the development of 'learning to learn' skills (Muijs & Reynolds 2011) and appropriate scaffolding (Morgan 2014) means that students are less likely to view the teaching and learning process as a transfer of knowledge and the assessment process as a tick-box exercise of how much information they have retained with prescribed generalised feedback. This understanding shifts attention to problem-solving skills and application of education and skills to real-life situations that would benefit the wider employment skills of university graduates.

Teaching study skills is a preliminary route into differentiation of teaching and learning. Baseline study skills provide understanding of the HE context and socialisation for students, but also an insight into students' profiles and levels (Morgan 2014) for the lecturer. Landrum and McDuffie (2010) usefully define differentiation as a pedagogical approach that benefits students of differing readiness levels and modes of learning. The readiness levels terminology is particularly relevant on the context of widening participation where students join with various prior education experiences and perceptions. Furthermore, readiness implies that effective teaching and learning can only take place in the right conditions for both the student and lecturer. Should the student not be ready for the level of teaching and learning, teaching will not be effective. In order to foster readiness, differentiation can go both ways of providing a level of scaffolding by varying the ways in which students learn to match their preferred styles, and challenging those who are ahead of their peers (Morgan 2014). In particular, study skills modules set the expectations at HE level and make differentiation possible at the later

stages aimed and personal/academic growth and individual success (Landrum & McDuffie 2010). The limited knowledge of individual students in the case of large student cohorts in particular disciplines in HE pose a challenge to operationalise approaches to differentiation, but then seminars, tutor groups and individual meetings with academic staff could resolve the issues and work towards building familiarity. Ramsden (2003) outlines a number of assessment strategies which in some sort of amalgamation could provide a realistic idea about student's understanding and inform future planning on the part of the lecturer.

In exploring student perspectives, Clouston (2008) provides a comprehensive analysis of the key aspects of differentiating learning. The emphasis is on the facilitator role of the lecturer and the importance of maintaining an interactive learning environment; focus on developing skills and motivation for life-long learning (Muijs & Reynolds 2011, Neumann et al. 2002) through the use of differentiated teaching, scenarios and assessment in line with students' personal interests and capabilities and feedback that allows space for reflection and further improvement. Students tend to value evidence for their progress in terms of learning objectives (Clouston 2008). In this case, differentiation provides not only realistic indication but also maintains confidence and motivation in relation to the achievement baselines. For instance, students who are working at lower levels, still get a sense of achievement and clarity about their progress and areas/direction for further development because lecturers reflect the value of their learning in the bigger picture of HE and employability.

Last but not least, academic staff availability which was touched upon earlier was indicated as a top priority by students (Clouston 2008). Lecturers should be readily available and approachable for enabling learning in particular cases when students may struggle. However, this approach is not without limitations and time constraints as well as competing priorities in the job of an academic. In order to benefit all students, differentiation ultimately requires hard work and commitment by knowledgeable and well-prepared educators (Morgan 2014).

In summary, students' unique profiles are shaped by internal factors such as learning style preference, personal characteristics, aspirations, and external factors in term of culture, educational background, socio-economic status, family situation. For teaching and learning to be effective, it needs to be sensitive and responsive to students' individual needs in deciding what they already know and what it is that they need to learn (Landrum & McDuffie 2010). Thus differentiated teaching and learning prompts lecturers to reflect on the best possible ways to individualise the content, process and product of learning, in other words, focusing on the curriculum, particular classroom approaches and assessment.

4. RESEARCHING OUR PRACTICES

Newman et al. (2002) emphasise that lecturers at university, particularly those teaching at undergraduate level, could benefit from reflection on their teaching activities through continuous professional development events. However, in our context, most of these events take place within our separate departments and disciplinary communities, making it difficult to compare across disciplines. Reflecting on our teaching practices and approaches that enable our students to succeed in their learning in regular conversations spurred interest in our differentiation practices. More specifically, in the similarities and differences between differentiation at the school level and differentiation at HE level in the first instance. We both believed that differentiated practices created both opportunities and raised limitations to supporting teaching and learning and the personal development of our students. These conversations prompted additional individual reflection on teaching and learning practices in our HE classrooms in the two different subject areas. The approaches used in Early Childhood Studies were very much influenced by the school-based differentiation practices of adaption content and delivery to meet the individual needs of students (Tomlinson 2000). The approaches utilised in the Business studies context were driven by a recently completed PGCE in teaching at HE level completed by the lecturer. These reflections shaped the direction of our small-scale research into differentiation at HE level. Our aims were to explore our individual differentiation practices within disciplinary areas; to explore the challenges and opportunities around differentiation in HE; to give

students voice to express their understanding and experience of differentiation in our classrooms, and lastly, to compare the views from the two different disciplines. The following narratives provide an insight into our own differentiation practices most commonly used in our classrooms.

4.1. Differentiation in Early Childhood Studies

The Early Childhood Studies field is dominated by a number of educational and socio-cultural theories that explain the nature and process of learning. These view the process as lifelong and are thus applicable to the HE context as well as the practice of working with young children. Teaching and learning practice are influenced specifically by theoretical concepts such as Vygotsky's zone of proximal development whereby students are pushed beyond their immediate abilities and comfort in learning to discover new challenges (Morgan 2014); Bruner's spiral curriculum that provides open course structures and opportunities for enriching and reiterating knowledge and understanding at the subject level (Neumann et al. 2002); lastly, learning is viewed as a step-by-step process where students build on existing knowledge in order to access, understand and embed more complex and abstract concepts. This idea builds on Bernstein's horizontal and vertical discourses of knowledge, and particularly the importance of embedding everyday knowledge into the curriculum in order to make learning more accessible to diverse learners (Kaneva 2015). Thus differentiated instruction benefits both academically oriented and less academic students as it provides support or challenge as necessary.

Outlined are examples of differentiated instruction utilised in Early Childhood Studies classes. Such instruction is concerned with both the content and the method of teaching and learning adopted in the classroom:

- An initial focus on becoming familiar with the students as individuals, their strengths, weaknesses and fears with regards to HE given that the vast majority of students are from non-traditional non-academic backgrounds and have low self-esteem and confidence. This is achieved through ice-breakers, observations of individual work and group collaborations, class dynamics and participation. Another aspect that contributes to this process is the role of personal tutorials which enables lecturers to understand the backgrounds of students in a more informal environment. A difficulty with this process is that classes are usually split between a number of personal tutors and thus the lecturer is a personal tutor for only a small group of students.
- Varying teaching and class facilitation approaches form a lecture to seminar, discussion, group, pair and individual work within the same class in order to respond to students' differing learning preferences and individual profiles.
- Varying group composition for different tasks that require a level of collaboration and problem-solving, for example, friendship, ability, topic, prior knowledge, practical experience, random allocation.
- Providing a range of difficulty levels within specific tasks, for instance, compulsory task, extension, additional reading, and additional questions.
- Differentiated feedback on assignment plans and drafts and assessments that incorporates elements of 'feed-forward' to benefit students' further learning and assessments

These practices are not an exhaustive list, rather an illustration in order to put the research into context.

4.2. Differentiation in Business Studies

Unlike the Early Childhood Studies, Business Studies is dominated by management (e.g. Human Resources, Marketing, Economics, etc.) and business administration theories rather than educational and socio-cultural theories about the learning process. Nonetheless, there are some commonalities with the approach adopted in ECS in terms of (1) the role of personal tutors and tutorials which enables

lecturers to understand students on a more personal level and (2) introducing theoretical perspective into student learning while, at the same time, maintaining a strong real world focus. The applied nature of business and management means that it is important to educate students as well as train them (McKenzie & Swords 2000; Ottewill & Macfarlane 2003).

More specifically, however, outlined are examples of differentiated instruction utilised in Business Studies classes:

- Main lectures with large student groups are often timetabled and delivered separately from seminars where students are separated into smaller groups convened by different lecturers.
- Formal, timetabled opportunities and slots for students to discuss their work and assignments provide structured occasions for interacting with students on a one-to-one basis, getting a good feel on their level of understanding and setting individualised challenging but achievable targets.
- Ongoing informal in-class assessment aiming to keep students aware of their progress and provide recommendations to improve their achievement.
- Written subject specific and more general study skills comments on work that are genuinely useful to students and provide pointers for improving their learning.
- Set assignments discussed with students to clarify what an appropriate format and answer would consist of. In terms of differentiation, this includes modelling by providing examples of appropriate answers of previous students, parts of relevant writing or writing frames that enable students to demonstrate the best of their understanding.

These initiatives emphasise the realisation of the role of interaction and discussion in differentiated learning and draw attention to the role and value of social contact in engaging and motivating students (Scudamore 2013; Thomas 2012). However, this approach can be a particularly daunting task with large cohorts as is the case here.

4.3. Students' perspectives on our individual practices

While reflection on our own teaching practices and sharing experiences of practical teaching or assessment strategies was worthwhile, we felt that the student voice on such practices was equally important in order to further reflect and enrich our classroom approaches. We decided to approach students from each discipline to seek their views on differentiation in HE and our own use of the process in teaching and learning. We carried out semi-structured interviews with small groups of students in Early Childhood Studies (ECS) and Business Studies (BS). These interviews were organised in order to support a deeper reflection on our own practices, obtain feedback from students based on what worked and what did not work for them and to obtain a general understanding of the place of differentiation in the educational process from the point of view of the students.

All students who participated in the interviews were studying for Foundation degrees at the University of Bolton in the current academic year. We chose students for the FdA Early Years Childhood Studies and the FdSc Business and Management as we aimed for the students to be at a similar stage of their studies. Foundation degrees were introduced in 2002 by the then Department for Education and Skills in order to develop academic and work-based learning whereby students can develop skills relevant to a particular type of employment. Foundation degrees are the equivalent of a two-third of a full Honours degree and are a standalone qualification that can be followed by employment, further study to a full Honours degree or professional accreditation. According to the QAA (2010) Foundation degrees are designed with the specific needs of local employment markets in mind and offer course elements and content not necessarily present in a traditional Honours degree. These are designed in close involvement with employers and relevant professional bodies. Foundation degrees have a strong widening participation element to them which makes them attractive for students from non-traditional and non-academic backgrounds who wish to study at HE level and have the opportunity to 'earn and learn' (QAA 2010, p.7). All of the students involved in the research were in some form of employment

running alongside their studies and had non-academic qualifications on entry at the University of Bolton, for instance, a Level 3 National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) (HM Government 2016). In this respect, the students' background closely reflected a significant proportion of student profiles at the University of Bolton, which is recognised as a widening participation HE institution.

Given the nature of our students, and in particular their confidence and self-belief, we chose to carry out the interviews in small groups for each subject area. This way the students could reflect and respond to our questions in a non-threatening environment and with familiar people while bouncing ideas of each other (Robson 2011). We felt that this way the research would feel more like a natural conversation rather than a formal exercise. The semi-structured nature of the interviews also meant that we could vary the line of questioning and allow for the students to expand on ideas we had not previously considered. At the time of the research, the ECS students had completed their final assessments the previous semester, while the BS students had just completed their studies in the current semester. This gave us an opportunity to engage the students in a conversation about the progression of their studies over the past two years and across two different HE levels. Both groups of students had been taught by the same lecturer at least twice in different semesters during their studies. We felt this was a necessary prerequisite for the analysis in order to be able to jointly reflect on students' experiences from differentiation in their classes, their progress in their studies and perceived success. Having completed a Foundation degree, the students also had a range of experiences from other classes that could be brought in when comparing practices and progress. The possibility of looking back to the first year of study and then compare with the second year provided an opportunity to consider course differentiation and differences between levels of study (e.g. HE level 4 and HE level 5).

Given our very different educational and disciplinary backgrounds, we expected different responses or levels of awareness from our students with regards to differentiation. Due to the nature of ECS as a work-based discipline involving students in working with young children in educational settings and reception classes in primary schools, we expected that ECS students would have good awareness of learning theories and approaches and the general principles of classroom differentiation in an educational context. This type of knowledge and practice are embedded in the Early Childhood Studies curriculum and continuously reinforced through practice in childcare settings. Furthermore differentiation has its place in statutory documents legislating work with young children, such as the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (DfE 2014). We also expected that ECS students would be attuned to their own approaches to learning and be aware of the process as a segmental progression through different levels of knowledge, understanding and expertise in a subject area. Therefore, the term differentiation would not need to be explicitly explained and students would be discussing a familiar concept applied within the HE context. By contrast, BS students were expected to need a number of clarifications about the meaning and use of differentiation in HE. They were supposedly less familiar, if at all, with theories and approaches to teaching and learning due to their background in the business sector. We felt that these differences between the two groups of students would provide a discussion on the way students perceive differentiated teaching and learning at the University of Bolton.

The interviews took 40 to 50 minutes and they included a range of questions aiming to shape a discussion about differentiation and its place in HE teaching and learning:

- What is differentiation?
- How does differentiation take place in lessons, tutorials, written work?
- How has differentiation worked for you at different stages of your studies?
- What are the challenges of differentiation at HE?
- What are the opportunities of differentiation at HE?
- Have you experienced different differentiation at HE level 4 and 5? How so?

The questions were posed in an informal manner with clarifications provided as needed and additional prompting questions addressed at the students or lecturers. Consequently, the interviews were audio recorded, fully transcribed and anonymised in order to prepare the data for analysis.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We began the interviews by establishing the meaning of differentiation as understood by our students. This was crucial in order to agree the meaning of terminology and exemplify the use of the concept of differentiation in our teaching and learning practices. As pre-empted, ECS students had an existing academic and professional understanding of differentiation developed through their practice and attendance on the course:

Obviously we do it [differentiation] at work with the children. We are looking at the ages and stages of development and whether they are capable of doing a certain thing or not, like for example you may have an adult led activity that you need to make simpler or a little bit more challenging for different children (ECS S1)

It was indicated earlier that differentiation as a process to addressing the content and the approach to teaching and learning in a classroom has been influenced by theories such as Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, Bruner's notion of scaffolding learning and Gardner's multiple intelligences (Morgan 2014). Such theories form part of the curricular content taught to ECS students across their course and as a result they become very adept at applying theory to practice and using theories to explain observations in practice, in particular. In this respect, the ECS students had the tools and knowledge to apply learning theories to their own experiences at HE.

They also likened differentiation in their HE classroom to what happens in their practice emphasising the difference in levels but the similarity in principles of learning:

It's similar to probably what we do at work with the children. Obviously you are in the same kind of role with what we are when we are at work. You differentiate towards us, say ECS S2 may understand something and I might not. But you may go about a different way how to show it to me... Everybody is a different learner as well so sometimes we'll do practical things in class and things you'll get us doing, sometimes we'll be watching videos and things like that which shows that people learn in different ways and their preferences, and kind of visuals and more practical learning, more academic learning. (ECS S1)

Comparing the role of the lecturer to their own roles as early years practitioners, exemplified an expectations that lecturers should differentiate teaching and learning at HE because this addresses individual learning preferences, student profile and background, including prior educational experience, and the basic nature of learning as a segmented progression. It is also worth noting that traditionally ECS classes at the University of Bolton are small in size with no more than 25 students. In these circumstances, lecturers are able to get to know the students and differentiate their teaching appropriately. The size of the groups did not require a distinct differentiation between a lecture and a seminar. The two types of engagement were seamlessly incorporated throughout classes.

By contrast, BS students were not immediately aware of the concept of differentiation. They required an explanation of its meaning and principles and the way differentiation contributes to shaping teaching and learning in HE contexts. It became clear that class size in BS was more variable than in ECS, with groups that could range between 15 and 80 students. This required a completely different approach to teaching, whereby for particular subjects students would have separate lecture and seminar due to the size of the group. The larger the group, the more difficult students felt differentiation was and they recognised that differentiation happened more easily in smaller groups and seminar classes. On reflection, BS students recognised differentiated practices in their classes:

I think it really helped when we had group discussions because sometimes as you know different students have different ways of learning and discussions are helping us to learn. But with the discussions we were able to have our own input of what we understood and also it would help the

tutor understand how we've understood the topic as well because they can go on and tell us what was right but we could portray our understanding or perceive it in a completely different manner. So in the discussions we were able to have our own input in and he was able to understand where we were at and how much of the topic we understood as well, I think it really did help. (BS S2)

BS students were aware that they had received different input from the lecturer based on their individual level, understanding, strengths and weaknesses. They also noted that such input was not limited to class time or face-to-face tutorials. Differentiated feedback on assessment plans or assignment drafts played a critical role in enabling students to achieve their particular idea of success in the HE context. Students from both disciplines acknowledged lecturers' efforts to provide them with support in preparation for their assessments:

Well if you put the work in, then the tutor will look at it whenever, it's not just in the tutorial. If you need to see them, that's not a problem, they will look at your work but if you leave it till the last minute, then they are probably not going to help you. All the tutors are really helpful with the feedback. (BS S1)

Although it transpired that the particular students who took part in the research did not often compare feedback with their peers, they were aware that verbal and written feedback was specific to their individual assessments and drafts. Furthermore, the ECS students acknowledged that often they were working on different topics for their assessments due to choice provided by the lecturer, making comparison very difficult if not impossible.

I think quite a lot of it is specific to yourself, like I said, we are all doing different theories or different interventions from the other one. (ECS S2)

I think it depends on your piece of work because someone else may need a different type of a boost in comparison to yourself so it will depend on your piece of work, how you've written it and where it's got its weaknesses and its strengths so definitely differentiation goes into that as well. Because we are not all going to have the same piece of work so we get what we need, the tutor usually knows our needs and they try to address these needs. (BS S2)

Discussing feedback with the students brought up the notion of feeding forward, which is becoming increasingly popular in widening participation efforts at HE. The idea of feeding forward is that students do not amend final assessed work so feedback focusing solely on what could be improved in the context of a particular piece of writing is not helpful. As such feedback should be constructive and oriented towards more generic academic skills and writing style that are applicable in future assessments. This process of feeding forward benefits students' academic and professional development as a means of reflecting back and incorporating prior learning in future course modules or at the workplace.

Then you can look back on your previous assignments on your feedback, oh I need to do this next time. Because I feel like I have gone up a few percentages in all my modules which I am really pleased about and I am hoping that I would continue to do so with looking back at the feedback that you have given us. (ECS S1)

Perhaps feeding back and feeding forward is an important aspect of differentiation that enables progressing through studies in a sustained way. As lecturers, we both aim to develop students as independent, confident and self-reliant learners. This is important not only for their academic study at university, but also for the workplace where they have specific responsibilities and duties and perhaps less day to day feedback on performance. Working with differentiated feedback allows students to tap into their strengths and weaknesses and become reflective practitioners and employees who strive for continuous improvement. These ideas are closely linked with academic progress.

Given that all the students were from non-traditional academic backgrounds, awareness of strengths and weaknesses was of paramount importance in order to ensure academic progression. All of the students seemed to be able to recognise ways in which they worked best, be it in a friendship group, individually, by learning from practical experiences, or feedback on assessed work. In order to appreciate the steep learning curve at HE level, students also needed basic understanding of the

process of learning and an appreciation of the individual progress they had made over the last two years of study. One of the students shared their progression:

My marks are roughly the same but I didn't do so bad last year. I think I have similar marks this year to last year. (BS S3)

It was recognised that the level of study between the two years on the Foundation degree (HE level 4 and 5) was different with an increasing level of critical thinking and independent learning at the later stages of the course. Thus, even when assessment grades remain the same, there is an increase in the quality of the work produced by students.

In terms of awareness of making academic progress over time ECS students seemed more aware of their gradual progression. In an example of achieving a grade of 50, students felt that they needed to progress gradually through 55, 60, 65, in order to achieve a grade of 70. They ascertained that:

For someone to get in the 50s that's obviously what they are capable of at the time. (ECS S2)

This was also likened to their practice with young children where practitioners have to acknowledge children's achievement and capabilities at the time in order to plan activities and learning within their reach. Simply put, ECS students felt that a grade of 70 was beyond the reach of a student who is currently achieving grades around 50.

Interestingly, this discussion took longer with the BS students. Initially, they felt that grades depended on students putting in the required effort. In the spirit of differentiated learning, one of the students concluded:

But if the tutor can see that you want to get a first [grade above 70], then they will push you in that direction. They won't spoon-feed you but if they see you are motivated, they will push you to get there. (BS S2)

Both groups of students, however, were in agreement that extenuating circumstances were sometimes preventing them and their peers from learning or demonstrating their learning at university. Such circumstances are often part of student profiles at widening participation HE institutions. The idea of 'earning while learning' embedded in the Foundation degrees benchmarks (QAA 2010) is not an easy option to achieve in practice as our students often deal with competing academic and external demands. In addition to this, whilst ECS students were all in employment in the childcare and education sector for the duration of their studies in order to relate theory to practice, the BS course could further benefit from opportunities for earning via work placements that were not fully utilised and integrated into curriculum design at the time. In that respect, differentiation based on knowledge of the students is even more needed in order to understand their engagement in classes or lack thereof. Oftentimes, it turns out that lack of engagement does not result from lack of motivation, rather than concerns for other aspects of students' lives:

For example if you begin the first year and you moved to a new home and you are going through a lot of stress of course your performance would be a lot different from if you were settled down ready in the home, or if you were in financial struggles. So achievement can be affected by outside circumstances. (BS S2)

Unless there were other reasons for why maybe they got a lower mark, you know they might have had personal reasons. (ECS S1)

In summary, in both groups differentiation led to a steady progress and academic success, however, ECS students had more realistic expectations on how differentiation can enable them to take ownership of their progress and a pre-existing understanding of the learning process developed in their professional practice. They highly praised study skills modules at the beginning of their academic studies equipping them with knowledge and skills necessary at HE level. BS students recognised their individual progression through their studies, but we felt that students who are not as aware of the learning progress should be better prepared to recognise their progressing and have realistic expectations in order to avoid disappointment when steep achievement curves are not possible.

In discussion the opportunities for differentiated learning at HE level, all students recognised the importance of personal interest and engagement with the taught content and curriculum, as well as the lecturer. Motivation was also another key component for academic success and students felt differentiated teaching and learning ought to spur motivation in order to be successful. This could be achieved by using different modes of learning, topics, group work and practical analytical case studies. Relationships with peers also led to productive learning and increased motivation while in class. Lastly, the students felt that the attitude of the lecturer and their confidence in students' abilities is crucial for achieving success, particularly in a widening participation context:

For example if I was taught by a tutor that I though believed in my skills, in my intellect and they were doing their best for me to achieve my goals, I would put extra effort especially in that specific module so I think it really depends on both sides. (BS S2)

It takes someone to say you can do that! (ECS S2)

Like your self-esteem and things like that, I think it can help towards that because when I first started I tended to doubt everything so having that differentiation from different tutors and feedback did give you a bit more confidence in yourself and thinking yes, I can do this. (ECS S1)

The opportunities presented by differentiated teaching and learning related to academic progression and success at an individual pace through both feedback and feed-forward, approachable and helpful lecturers, and a growing sense of confidence and self-belief. Students also acknowledged that differentiated learning was more easily achieved in smaller groups and through a range of activities to engage with the subject content. Mentioned by both groups of students was the importance of peer learning that is often spurred by differentiated practices and group work in our classrooms. These findings are not surprising, but important to reflect on in lecturers' practice as oftentimes the focus shifts from students as individuals to the standards-driven agenda of HE and the educational profession as a whole (Tomlinson 2000).

Differentiated teaching and learning also had recognised challenges. All students favoured small groups work and individual time with their lecturers in order to extract maximum benefits for their learning so it was an expected outcome to mention class sizes in BS as a challenge when differentiating learning.

Especially in the bigger groups it must be very challenging to work with different people together especially when we don't know them very well and you don't know their intellect and their specific learning style because you can't say intellect in general.... The tutor has no way of knowing if Student 1 would work better with Student 3 or someone else. There is no way a tutor will know who would work better with who, it would just be trial and error and it can go really wrong especially in a bigger group. But in smaller groups it is less risky (BS S2)

It was also recognised that differentiation can be time consuming for lecturers in terms of individual attention and input. Students did not feel like the size of the group affected individual feedback per se, rather the time and effort it would take for the lecturer to help each student. Other factors that could pose a challenge included students' lack of motivation to learn or engagement in classes, timeframes of the semester, students balancing a number of commitments and leaving academic work until the last minute. ECS students also acknowledged barriers posed by even wider student diversity, including individuals who are learning English as second language and those with disabilities. Each of these factors could be explored in more depth in further research.

As much as we expected that differentiation practices will vary across the two subject areas, ECS and BS, the semi-structured discussions with the students brought to our attention a number of similarities in our teaching and feedback approaches. Interestingly, these similarities were not subject specific, rather teaching specific and related to HE pedagogies and what makes effective teaching. Despite the challenges and our constant balancing act around standards and teaching individuals, for us as lecturers, differentiation is a highly rewarding process of being able to see students make progress and achieve their notion of success.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to first and foremost reflect on our own differentiation practices in two different disciplines and incorporate student voice in the process so as to acknowledge the experiences of teaching and learning of your students. In the process, we exemplified some of the opportunities and limitations related to differentiated teaching at HE level, and in particular in relation to our two disciplines. Despite initial expectations that differentiation practices in Early Childhood Studies and Business Studies will differ, we actually came to the conclusion that practices were similar with one common objective at the heart – enhancing the student learning experience, building confidence and enabling our students to achieve the desired form of success, whatever that might be at the individual level. Essentially, the similarities were related to the process of teaching and learning and not the individual disciplines per se. What makes a good class in ECS is probably very similar to what makes a good class in BS with regards to students' motivation, engagement and deeper level of learning. With this in mind, we came up with a set of recommendations that are particularly aimed at lecturers in widening participation institutions where differentiated practice is of paramount importance when responding to the diversity of students and learning profiles:

- As HE lecturers we should equip our students with understanding of the principles of learning in general, and differentiation in teaching and learning in particular, so they can benefit more fully from our practice in their journeys to becoming independent, self-reliant and confident learners.
- Teaching and learning should be organised around small to medium sized groups in order to allow familiarity between lecturers and students and maximum benefits of differentiated planning and learning. This will inevitably place a much important emphasis on the socialisation between lecturers and students in order to provide effective and individualised teaching.
- Academic skills modules, which were highly praised by students, could be utilised in developing a better understanding of the learning process and students' own strengths and shortcomings. This approach would also foster a focus on reflective practice and students' responsibility for personal growth with a HE community.
- As lecturers we should help our students develop their confidence in their learning abilities and a more positive relationship with education as a means of developing self-esteem and self-worth. These qualities are an asset to graduates and pave the journey towards life-long learning.
- We should recognise the time and resource intensive nature of differentiation to support effective teaching and learning and the related resource allocation. There is much scope within widening participation HE institutions to strengthen differentiated practices and enable student success, but this will require hard work, dedication and support for staff.

We pose these recommendations as open ended statements, as we believe they have the potential to foster reflection in colleagues from other cultural and institutional contexts. While this paper is work in progress and very much a series of reflections and commentary, we very much hope to ponder on aspects of differentiation in teaching and learning in the future with an even more prominent student voice.

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